

THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: A CONTEMPORARY MODEL
FOR THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

A Professional Project
Presented to
the Faculty of
The School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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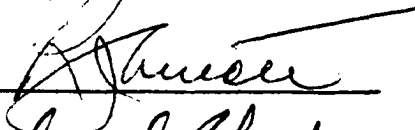
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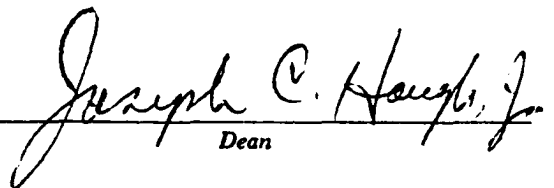

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ABSTRACT

The problem being addressed by this project has to do with the Mission of the church as it is related to concerns that are social and cultural in nature. More specifically the project deals with the church in America as it relates to the particular problems within the American society and the ways in which these problems extend themselves to become matters of global concern.

In order to deal effectively with the church in American society the project is developed by referring to the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. Through his ministry on the American scene, King contributed a great deal toward the establishment of an active and working relationship between the American church and the American society.

Following a brief introduction, the first chapter in the project is designed to analyze King's approach to the Mission of the church. It begins with a review of the heritage of the Black church as a foundation for King's ideas. Four major areas of King's attitude about church Mission are then developed in the chapter as they correspond with that heritage.

In the second chapter, the processes are explored by which King developed an integration of the cultural and religious influences of his life into a vital and valid form of contemporary ministry in America.

Then in chapter 3, the project is focused on King's vision of the "Beloved Community." This idea is the central concept of the project which brings together King's thinking on the Mission of the church

and his approach to ministry. As a second and concluding emphasis in this chapter the concept of the "Beloved Community" is examined as a far reaching concept with possible Missional applications in the contemporary church of America.

INTRODUCTION

The two curricular areas to be integrated by this project are church management and Christian ethics. The problem being addressed by the project has to do with the Mission of the church as it is related to concerns that are social and cultural in nature. More specifically we will be dealing with the church in America as it relates to the particular problems within the American society and the ways in which these problems extend themselves to become matters of global concern.

In order to deal effectively with the church in American society the project will be developed by referring to the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. Throughout his ministry in the American scene, King contributed a great deal toward the establishment of an active and working relationship between the American church and the American society.

The importance of this project to the life of the church has to do with the need for the church to realize its identity in relation to the task of its Mission. The church's Mission is directly related to the historic vision which it embodies in the concept of the "kingdom of God." It is the highest ideal and the greatest hope in Christianity that the vision will be actualized at some point in the future.

The project is relevant to professional leadership in the church because of the necessity to have an approach by which the vision is proclaimed in the world. It is not enough for the church simply to talk about its vision. Rather, it is important to put the ideals of

the vision into language that is meaningful within the socio-cultural structure. Seeking a viable process by which this approach can be taken, therefore, is central to professional leadership in the church.

The central thesis in this project, then, follows naturally. It is that in order for the church to be in Mission, it must be able to understand its own vision of the "kingdom of God" as it must relate that vision in an understandable fashion to social, political, and cultural concerns.

There are several major terms and concepts that will be referred to in this project. Among them are the church, its Mission, conditions of a social and cultural nature, evil and injustice, freedom and equality, the "kingdom of God," the "American dream," and the "Beloved Community."

The church will be referred to as the bearer of the historic vision of the "kingdom of God" as brought forth in the person of Jesus. The project will be dealing specifically with the Christian church in America. The church's Mission is an inclusive idea. It will be used with reference to the purpose of the church's existence and the ways in which the church expresses itself along lines of social and cultural concern.

The conditions of a social and cultural nature is one of the major themes in the project. It will be dealt with in two ways: first as these conditions influenced the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the formation of his theology. Second, as these conditions challenge and confront the contemporary American church in Mission.

Evil and injustice will be developed as factors that are perpetuated within social structures. They are to be understood as the permanent factors in human society which lead to institutionalized greed, racism, or sexism.

Freedom and equality, on the other hand, will be dealt with as goals to be achieved within society. They are the conditions under which persons have the opportunity to participate fully in the functions of a social structure and through which all persons have the same opportunity to pursue happiness.

The importance of the "kingdom of God" will be viewed from the perspective of its historical significance in affecting an impression of God's redemptive love within the collective conscience of a society. At the same time, the "American dream" will be referred to as it reminds the nation of the goals and intentions upon which it was founded.

Finally the "Beloved Community" will be explored as a major concept in King's thinking. It will be dealt with as an integrating idea in King's theology and as an idea with significant value in the Missional efforts of the contemporary American church.

There has been much work done in recent years to analyze the nature and character of Martin Luther King, Jr. Many have tried to understand the dimensions of his effect on contemporary theology while others have sought to describe his impact upon the American nation. Smith and Zepp¹ have attempted to draw out a systematic theology for

¹Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974).

King. Using for a background a knowledge of his college, seminary, and graduate school studies, combined with a thorough overview of his speeches, sermons, and writings, they have been able to develop many important themes in his thinking.

At the same time, other writers have done biographies on the life of King. Among these writers are David L. Lewis, Kenneth Slack, L. D. Reddick, and King's wife, Coretta Scott King. In each of these life stories the authors have attempted to grapple with the legacy of M. L. King. They have sought to explain the characteristics of King as a man, what the contents of his message were, and how these two elements came together in King as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

In spite of the vast collection of literature assembled about King, however, very little has been said specifically about his approach to the Mission of the church. But this is not to say that there is a void of information about the subject. On the contrary, much has been written on Mission by King himself.

King² has described the developments of the Montgomery bus boycott from beginning to end. In that overview he referred repeatedly to the role played in the movement by the church. At the same time, he brought mention to the ways in which the church did not participate.

Later, his examination³ of the church in America became more thorough. Contained within the book is his letter from the Birmingham

²Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

³Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

jail. In a stinging attack, he confronted the white moderate churches of America for failing to take a stance on the issue of racial injustice.

Added to these two main books, everything that King had written and said makes occasional references to the responsibilities of the church in America. In Strength to Love,⁴ the essays are taken from sermons that he had preached in the church. The underlying currents of responsibility for the church in these sermons cannot be mistaken. And finally, in his public ministry, he made a statement to the nation which spoke for itself. His activities as a political leader, the speeches he gave, and the other books he wrote are composites of the socio-cultural emphasis that he placed upon himself in the role of Christian ministry.

Because of the breadth in the character of M. L. King, it is necessary to maintain fairly strict limitations in this project. As we have mentioned, there is a wealth of information about him. It would be all too easy to get carried away by his legacy and his charisma. For this reason we will maintain a strict adherence to the points of King's thinking in question; his beliefs about the responsibilities of the church; his own theology as it represented his integration of cultural and religious influences, and his vision of the "Beloved Community."

There is a sense in which church Mission and Christian ethics

⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1964).

are already influenced by each other. On the one hand, church Mission is aimless without the consideration of moral and ethical implications. At the same time a focus on the human condition in society is of little consequence if it is not viewed through the hopeful expectations of a Christian Mission. The project seeks to show simply that these two disciplines come together naturally within the context of the Christian church community.

The resources to be used in the project will involve a study of all material written by King. In addition serious attention will be given to the theological summary about King developed by Smith and Zepp, while the biographies by L. D. Reddick and David L. Lewis will be used to provide general information about King's background.

The chapters in the project will be designed in the following manner. Chapter 1 will seek to analyze King's approach to the Mission of the church. It will begin by reviewing the heritage of the Black church as a foundation for King's ideas. Four major areas of King's attitude about church Mission will be viewed, then, as they correspond with that heritage. Chapter 2 is designed to show the processes by which King developed an integration of cultural and religious influences in his ministry. Finally, in chapter 3, King's vision of the "Beloved Community" will be explored. This idea will be developed as a concept which brings together his thinking on the Mission of the church and his approach to ministry. Moreover, the "Beloved Community" will be explored in this chapter as a far reaching concept that has dimensions of possible Missional applications by the contemporary American church.

Chapter 1

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AS DEVELOPED BY KING
WITH A BLACK CHURCH PERSPECTIVE

Getting a grasp on the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr. is difficult because he did not write it down in a systematic form. It has been said of his theology that it was a process wherein his thinking became actualized in the application of his ministry.¹ What he wrote, preached, and spoke about had come to represent, then, a large part of his theology.

For King, the church was a good starting point for much of his theology. It represented to him the vehicle of Christian activity in the world. His emphasis on the Mission of the church was one of his most prominent themes. He recognized the importance of the church community as a basis for a personal relationship with God. At the same time, he placed a heavy responsibility on the church to deal with social and cultural injustice. He wrote:

Religion deals with both earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two way road. On the one hand it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed.²

¹Lecture given by the Rev. James Lawson, School of Theology at Claremont, September 14, 1977.

²Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 36.

King's development of Mission, then, stressed the interaction between the church's evangelical activities and its activities of social involvement. But having incorporated this view into his theology did not make him its originator. It was, in fact, a distinct part of his heritage in the Black Church.

The Black Church is unique in American protestantism. It offers a theological perspective that has been drawn out of the socio-cultural realities of Negro people in American history. Moreover its role in Black communities has been central in helping to develop basic social and cultural characteristics of American Negro people.

King's theology was Christian, to be sure. But he was also a Black Christian. He was born and raised as a child of the Black Church. The views of this church and its development are a necessary part in any effort to understand his thoughts and actions with regard to the church and its Mission. For this reason it will be of value to develop, as simply as possible, an overview of some general information in Black Church history.

This story of course begins with the millions of Negro people who were torn away from their native countries in Africa and forced to adapt themselves to a life of slavery in a foreign continent. To be sure, this new life was one over which they had little or no control. The process of enslavement had separated one and all from social contexts and cultural heritages. They became members of a mass of Black people who had been brought from the continent of Africa. At first then, they were stripped of all social identity, and with it whatever individual identity had been derived from the social context was

lost.³

In return for these things the life of a slave offered them identity as doers of menial tasks, beings that were less than human and incapable of any sort of mental discipline, and persons who could not even manage the government of their own lives. The relationship between master and slave had become their basis for a new form of social cohesion.⁴

The extreme conditions of restriction and limitation, though, became the foundation blocks upon which the Black Church was built. The slaves had not been allowed to practice the religions they had brought with them from Africa. The rituals that were involved were viewed as pagan fetishes. But Christianity was the master's religion. At first Christian missionaries were not sure if it was proper to Christianize the Africans. They were, after all, thought to be less than human. More than this, there was an unwritten law that anyone who had been baptized or Christened could not be owned as a slave. Toward the middle or end of the eighteenth century, though, it was seen that Christian slaves were more adaptable to their enforced life styles than the non-Christians. About the same time certain states were beginning to pass laws which clearly stated that owning slaves who were Christian was all right.⁵

³Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson, The Negro's Church (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 1.

⁴E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York: Schocken, 1974), p. 12.

⁵Carter G. Woodson, The History of the Negro Church (Washington: Associated, 1971), pp. 1-19.

It had become generally accepted that a spiritual life was important to slaves. For the deprived slaves, though, Christian faith held a much deeper meaning. It was, to say the least, an outlet for repressed feelings which offered a message of salvation, hope, and prospect for escape from earthly burdens of life in slavery.⁶ Added to this, it offered a sense of self-worth, self esteem, and personhood as children of God. There was even a sense of hope for the future in this life when the day of justice and liberation would come. Elements of these values in the slave's religion can be seen in the spiritual hymns they had composed.

My God is a rock in a weary land,
My God is a rock in a weary land,
Shelter in time of storm.⁷

My Lord's within' all de time
He sees all you do, hears all you say.⁸

By and by, I'm goin' to lay down this heavy load.
By and by, by and by, I'm goin' to lay down this heavy load.⁹

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go,
Let them come out of Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.¹⁰

In these deep spiritual fibers then, many slaves became Christian and began to reflect a definite form of Christian life style. But in an ironic way the slaves' new interest in the Christian religion had also begun to bring them into a more equal status with the white

⁶Frazier, p. 16.

⁷Ibid., p. 20.

⁸Ibid., p. 21.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Hart M. Nelsen, Raytha L. Yorkley, and Anne K. Nelsen, The Black Church in America (New York: Basic, 1971), p. 19.

masters. Many plantations were providing religious instruction for the slaves. Often house servants were included in the family prayers. Indeed through the commonality of this faith the plantation was becoming a social institution as well as an industrial institution. Thus, participation in Christianity drew the slaves out of their moral isolation and brought them closer to their master's world.¹¹

Life among the Christian slaves had begun to take on the dimensions of community at this time. What little leisure they had together was often spent in fellowship and worship. Preachers, with some abilities to speak and read, rose up from the communities. Since it was all done in the interests of Christianity, masters were growingly more lenient about previous restrictions. Gradually slaves were allowed to spend more and more time together reading from the Bible and talking about the faith. The birth of the "invisible institution" of the Black Church was taking place.¹²

There were at the same time many Negroes who had already attained their freedom in the North. As they became Christian they joined as members in white churches.¹³ After a time though, attendance of Blacks had begun to outnumber that of whites. Because of this, Blacks were required to sit in specially designated areas of the sanctuaries. Feeling degraded they soon broke off to form their own churches. The action was encouraged by whites who often helped to fund the establishment of separate Black Churches. The first free

¹¹Frazier, p. 16.

¹²Ibid., pp. 23-25.

¹³Woodson, pp. 22-23.

Black churches were Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal.¹⁴

One of the most pronounced characteristics of the post-emancipation Black church was its integration of the secular and religious concerns of the people. Following the Civil War, Black Americans were a destitute minority. They had been liberated from white slave drivers and plantation oppression, but all that they knew about survival was derived from their lives on the plantations and under the oppressive leadership of the masters. Leaders of Black churches who had been free before emancipation were an important part of the solution to this problem. Like missionaries many of them filtered down into the Southern states and built their own version of the institutionalized church into the framework of the newly freed slaves' lives. The church for them became their new home, their community, and the institution around which they began to focus their lives.¹⁵ The Black church developed then as a merger between the "invisible institution" of the slaves and the already established Black institutional church. The fusion set into play major dynamics that have gone on to characterize the Black church since the Civil War.

Firstly, it was an agency of social control. Post-war Negroes lacked any distinguishing moral standards regarding the life of family. Families were almost non-existent in the days of slavery. Mates were often separated by the process of being bought and sold while slave owners sometimes simply intervened in relationships between mates. When slaves were freed they lacked sexual standards and

¹⁴Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 35-37.

promiscuity became rampant. The post-war Black church spoke out in matters of moral and ethical standards for its members.¹⁶

Secondly, the church functioned as an intermediary for the problems of Black economy. Poverty was an epidemic disease among Black Americans. The church sought to off-set this crisis by pooling whatever funds it could derive out of the meager gifts of its members. Several different charity societies sprang up from within the church to bring together as much money as possible. This money was used to aid the most down-trodden members in those communities. Persons suffering from severe illness or a death in the family were often the recipients.¹⁷

Thirdly, the church functioned as a primary center for the education of Black Americans. Almost all slaves had been illiterate. Indeed, many who were found being able to read were punished. Fear of literacy then, perpetuated even after the slaves were freed. The church emphasized the need to be educated and founded the first Black educational institutions.¹⁸

Lastly, the church functioned as a caucus of political action. Outside of the church Blacks were politically powerless. But using their traditional languages of Christian expression in the church they were able to deal effectively with political issues without being offensive to the oppressors. The church functioned effectively to influence elected representatives by their stand on issues and their choice of candidates.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 37-40.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 40-43.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 43-47.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 47-49.

On the whole then, the Black Church was an institution that had in many ways replaced the plantation. It offered a basic social cohesion to the people, a common focus of identity, and a universal language that was understood by all Black Christians. But in many ways the church had gone far beyond the religion of the slaves. It had sought to interpret the Christian message into themes that were relevant to the lives of the free Negro people.

Much of what King had written and talked about was derived from the history and tradition of this most significant heritage. In particular, his attitude toward the church and its Mission had been shaped as these familiar patterns came together in the contemporary Black Church of which he was a part. To be more specific, many of the key elements described in the overview of Black Church history are also themes that King used when addressing the churches of America about their responsibilities as participants in Christian Mission on the issues of racism and segregation, poverty, war, and other controversial social problems. From this point we will continue by focusing on these themes and the way in which they were used by King in his effort to confront and awaken the church to its true Christian Mission.

There are four areas which seem to stand out in his thinking and which also seem to be related to his heritage. The first of these is that the church is an instrument which encourages a sense of dignity, self-esteem, and self worth within the individuals who participate in the pursuit of a Christian relationship with God.

It is understood from most Christian perspectives that one of the objectives of the church has always been to bring persons into a

relationship with God. For King, though, the task was not only one of preaching to people about God, but it also included the necessity of making persons ready to receive God into their lives.

King perceived the nature of God as being manifested in a personal way through His characteristics of love and reason. Individuals who fully receive God, then, are doing so on a personal level. They have identified with God's image and they are able to relate to Him as an integrated personality. The feelings of dignity and self worth, then, are the foundations needed to identify with the personality of God. Indeed as Christians, he maintained, "every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth," and "every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator."²⁰ "Our Judeo-Christian tradition," he explained, "refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term, 'the image of God.' 'The image of God' is universally shared by all men."²¹

"The image of God" was the basis by which King reasoned that all persons are equal. But he carried this idea one step further. If all persons are equal because they are created in the "image of God," then the opposite must also be true. Persons who are treated as though they are not equal will not be able to identify themselves with "the image of God." Therefore, whenever individuals or institutions deprive a person or a cultural group of their equality they have deprived

²⁰Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 97.

²¹Ibid., p. 97.

those persons also of their birth-right of identifying themselves in "the image of God." Inadvertently then, those deprived persons are separated from the basis on which a personal relationship with God can be formed, that is, a sense of inherent dignity and self worth.

With this line of reasoning, King not only justified his efforts to bring about racial equality but he maintained that it was the duty and the moral responsibility of the Christian Church to work toward the equality of all persons. In one example he writes:

The church has an opportunity and a duty to lift up its voice like a trumpet and declare unto the people the immorality of segregation. It must affirm that every human life is a reflection of divinity, and that every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in man. The undergirding philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together.²²

The second area drawn out of Black Church heritage in King's thinking was his belief that the church in itself is an environment which goes beyond the idea of equality. As the community of believers, Christians share in the love of God through worship and become one body as brothers and sisters. The idea of the church as "the body of Christ" has special significance then, to indicate the unity of Christians through their love and their common sense of purpose.

The Christian worship and fellowship was an important part of the various Civil Rights campaigns over which King had taken leadership. Through nightly meetings conducted at churches in the Negro community the leaders were able to generate the power and depth that was needed to unify the entire Negro community. Included in the meetings

²²Ibid., pp. 99, 100.

was the enthusiastic preaching and encouragement by the leaders and the singing of freedom songs that had been adapted from the songs the slaves had sung--the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns, and the anthems of the movement.²³

The end of each meeting was marked by an invitational period. This was the period when the leaders would extend an appeal for volunteers to serve in the non-violent army. At this time volunteers were urged to give up their weapons. In exchange they were offered the most formidable weapon of all--the conviction that they were right. In an interesting way the invitational periods at the mass meetings were rather like the traditional altar call of evangelical churches. Persons who came forward were asked to give up their old ways and take on the love of God as a new way to face the challenge at hand. They were asked to pledge their allegiance to God through the eloquently simple dictates of conscience.²⁴

Yet in spite of his dedication to the church as the environment to stimulate brotherhood and sisterhood among Christians, King was saddened by the overwhelming presence of segregation within the church itself. From this point the church drew his harshest criticisms. ". . . no one observing the history of the church can deny the shameful fact that it has been an accomplice in structuring racism into the architecture of American society."²⁵ And in another example he

²³Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 57, 58.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 58, 59.

²⁵King, Where Do We Go from Here, p. 96.

wrote, "We must face the shameful fact that the church is the most segregated major institution in American society, and the most segregated hour of the week, as Professor Liston Pope has pointed out, is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning."²⁶

His challenge to the church in this facet of his ministry rang out with a loud clarity. Calling this a blasphemy against everything the Christian religion stands for he accused the churches of destroying community and making brotherhood impossible. "The underlying philosophy of Christianity," he states, "is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of racial segregation."²⁷

Removing "the yoke of segregation from its own body," he says, is the first step for the church to take in conquering segregation.²⁸ It has to try to get rid of ideational roots of race hate and give direction to the misunderstandings based on fear and suspicion. Only while this is being done does the principle of brotherhood and sisterhood become a reality and the focus on God as the center of Christian vision begin to become actualized in the life of the Christian community.

The third area of King's thinking to be drawn out of the Black Church heritage is his belief that the church is a community which strides toward freedom. The foundations for this belief are built on the idea that the Gospel is really the "good news" of freedom for

²⁶Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), p. 120.

²⁷Ibid., p. 160.

²⁸Ibid., p. 161.

human kind. Often King equated his concept of freedom with that of justice and equality. "I am compelled to carry the Gospel of freedom," he wrote, "beyond my own home town. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."²⁹

But freedom in its most realized form has two dimensions; the freedom of the individual and the freedom that exists within society. Because it deals with persons as individuals and as persons in a social context, both of these levels are important from the church's point of view. It seeks to bring about freedom in the personal, psychological, and spiritual sense, and freedom within the cultural and social orders of society. Since personal and social freedom are inter-dependent, however, there is a sense in which the church must focus on the future as a time in which individual spiritual and psychological fulfillment and equality of persons in inter-human relations come together. This unique relationship in time has often been referred to by King as the "Kingdom of God." He had drawn this image from the historical quest of Judeo-Christianity. The "Kingdom" as he described it took on a somewhat nebulous form. In this way he attempted to avoid what he called "a superficial optimism" on the one hand and "a crippling pessimism" on the other. He knew that overcoming social problems was a slow process, but he was also confident that social progress could be made through God's help and a sincere Christian effort. He explained in one passage:

²⁹King, Why We Can't Wait, pp. 78, 79.

Although man's moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, his never-ceasing strivings may bring him ever closer to the city of righteousness. And though the Kingdom of God may remain not yet as a universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in his universe. He is not outside the world looking on with a sort of cold indifference. Here on all the roads of life, he is striving in our striving. Like an ever-loving Father, he is working through history for the salvation of his children. As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it.³⁰

With a focus on the future then, the role of the church of the present is to be prophetic, urging persons to be honest and aware of themselves with regard to their limitations and their tendencies toward sin, and urging society to be honest with itself realizing its tendencies toward corporate sin and injustice in the social order.

On this subject, King's emphasis could not have been more clear. "It has always been the responsibility of the church," he pointed out, "to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and break the mores when necessary."³¹ "Furthermore," he continues, "any discussion of the role of the Christian minister today must ultimately emphasize the need for prophecy."³²

Moreover, the prophetic model is apparent in most of his speeches and writings. He called frequently for a revolution in values

³⁰King, Strength to Love, p. 78.

³¹King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 205.

³²Ibid., p. 210.

based on the Beatitudes and Isaiah 40:4 (KJV); "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. . . ." ³³ Another of his favorites was from Amos 5:24, "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." ³⁴

The prophetic role, then, may call upon the church to take direct action to bring about these realizations. To King, the idea of direct action meant the refusal to run away in the face of danger when a matter of justice and righteousness was at stake. His explanation of this concept goes further, however. The nature of the actions taken by the church, he believed, must be guided by the Christian principle of the power of love.

For this reason the method of non-violent resistance is a practical approach to the areas of direct action taken by the church. This method is a strategy which neither backs down to the enemy nor does it inflict physical violence upon the enemy. In a definitive passage he explained,

The non-violent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it so stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality. ³⁵

Finally, the fourth area used by King that relates to the Black Church heritage is that the church is a place where the concerns of

³³King, Strength to Love, p. 123.

³⁴King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 210.

³⁵King, Strength to Love, p. 170.

secular life are brought together with the faith and vision of the religious experience in Christianity. The term "prophet" has been applied to those who have striven to actualize their religious vision within the context of relational configurations of power. King's religious presuppositions were drawn from Christian theology and ethics. Believing that Jesus himself had stood in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, King believed that Christianity was the heir of the priority that had been assigned to the social dimension of life by the prophets of Israel. During the Civil Rights Campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, he explained,

. . .I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus said the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.³⁶

This integration of the secular and religious is particularly acute, therefore, in a culture descendent of Judeo-Christianity such as the United States. It is unrealistic to speak of the American society without realizing the way in which it has been influenced by Christian religion. In a democracy such as ours where individualism and freedom of choice has been emphasized it is equally unrealistic to suppose a religion that has not been shaped by the culture.

King's use of this relationship was based on his understanding of an important theme in American democracy. In the United States,

³⁶King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 78.

there has always been the dream of a future utopia or Holy Commonwealth, a dream of "a land of the free and the home of the brave." This dream in America has been derived from a combination of the religious hope for the Kingdom of God of the puritans and the secular dream of democracy rooted in the enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The goal of both traditions has been a perfected society in which there would be an opportunity and equality for all.

For King there were two elements that stood out in the American dream. The first is the universalism of the dream. It includes all classes, races, and religions. The second is that each person possesses certain inherent rights that are God given. In King's view, the problem of segregation was one of the greatest challenges to the hopes of both the American dream and the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God.

Often when he spoke he confronted the nation as a whole to be reminded of the dream on which it was founded. He wrote:

In the present crisis America can achieve either racial justice or the ultimate social psychosis that can only lead to domestic suicide. The democratic ideal of freedom and equality will be fulfilled for all--or all human beings will share in the resulting social and spiritual doom. In short, this crisis has the potential for democracy's fulfillment or facism's triumph; for social progress or retrogression. We can choose either to walk the high road of human brotherhood or to tread the low road of man's inhumanity to man.³⁷

Turning to the church, he was equally concerned that it be reminded of its great Christian vision as applied to the issue of segregation:

. . .if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice

³⁸King, Strength to Love, p. 57.

and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. Men far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.³⁸

In King's view, therefore, the church has a definite responsibility that is unique in America. It is to intentionalize the existing overlap between the religion and the culture by applying the visions of Judeo-Christianity to the goals of the society and incorporating the realistic circumstances that are unique to the secular life in America as a part of the church's understanding of its vision of the Kingdom of God. King's perspective of Mission at this point then, is to urge the church to become more integrated with the society in which it lives and the problems that exist there.

³⁸King, Strength to Love, p. 57.

Chapter 2

THE INTEGRATION OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES
IN THE MINISTRY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

In surveying the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. it is most revealing to notice the dual relationship of his life as a Christian and his interests in matters that were clearly social and political in nature. Uniquely, he discovered, that the faith and the depth of wisdom in a Christian relationship with God was profoundly relevant and applicable to the socio-cultural problems in the American society of which he was a part. Concurrently, his interpretation of the faith and wisdom in Christianity was based upon ideas and modes of expressions that were used by that same society. From this position he was able to act effectively and significantly both as a minister and as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

A closer examination of King's background has shown that the formation of this integration in him was brought about, at least in part, by the combined influences of cultural and religious experiences. It is certainly true that his experiences were affected by his life as a Negro. Having grown up in the South, he was a personal witness to the hate and bitterness that was characteristic of discrimination against the Black minority. As a child he witnessed his father having to defend the family against the effects of racism. As he grew to be a man himself there were numerous occasions in which he personally experienced the sting of racism.¹ His strong feelings about this subject developed as

¹David L. Lewis, King: A Critical Biography (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), pp. 6,7,11,16,&17.

a passion while he was still young. "As far back as I could remember," he wrote later, "I had resented segregation and had asked my parents urgent and pointed questions about it."² But even as he grasped for an understanding at that time he was pointed in the direction of understanding, personhood, and selfhood as the right of all people. In a statement he recalled by his mother, ". . .she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary. 'You are as good as anyone.'"³

Added to this in his experience was the atmosphere of democratic notions that permeated even the most segregated places in America. The ideals of "liberty and justice for all," with the right of every person "to pursue happiness," hung warily over the reality of his situation and that of his fellow Negroes. He described his youthful feelings in this way:

I could never adjust to the separate waiting rooms, separate eating places, separate rest rooms, partly because the separate was always unequal, and partly because the very idea of separation did something to my sense of dignity and self-respect.⁴

A clear characteristic of King's conceptual background, then, was his distinct dislike for the legal presence of social discrimination against Negroes in his community. Secondly, he was gripped by a passion to pursue a life of dignity and equality. These factors were the primary results of the effects that had been brought about by the cultural influences in the experiences of his childhood and youth.

²Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 18.

³Ibid., p. 19.

⁴Ibid., p. 20-21.

At the same time his life was taking shape from another direction of influence, for he was a serious participant in the life of the church. His father was a prominent minister in Atlanta and his family centered their activities around those of the church.⁵ From this involvement he gained two basic advantages to help him come to terms with his situation as a victim of segregation and racism. First the church was a natural outlet for the expression of feelings. It was a place in which the tensions and burdens of a segregated life were the common denominators of Christian fellowship. Second, the church helped to give perspective to the problem of being discriminated against. In the Black Church, Christianity was viewed as a heritage born out of oppression. Negro Christians, suffering as a result of racism and segregation, could identify with the religious tradition that dated back to a time when the people of Israel were slaves and the subsequent period of their exile. Moreover, they identified with Jesus a savior who had come to fulfill that heritage by offering a new hope of freedom for all people. The Church, then, was a community in this faith that gave guidance for the present and hope for the future.

The theology of this religious background was fundamentalistic and the Bible was a central emphasis. This approach provided young Martin with a thorough exposure to Biblical themes and imagery. But the approach was also centered around a literal acceptance of the Bible. This more narrow view caused Martin to doubt the extent to which Christianity was applicable to the social and political problems of his

⁵Lewis, p. 4.

culture. He needed an interpretation of Christian heritage and the Bible that could be related to the specific problems of racial injustice.

By the time Martin entered college, therefore, he was leaning more toward a career as a doctor or lawyer than that of a minister. These professions he thought were more meaningful pursuits in dealing effectively with contemporary problems.⁶ But the influences of his college experiences brought about a dramatic change in this point of view. He had taken sociology as his major. Though this was relevant to his pursuits, the tutoring of Dr. Mays, the school's president, and the instruction of George Kelsey, came to influence him more deeply.

In his biography about King, David L. Lewis writes that Kelsey, a professor of theology, "demonstrated the old biblical literalism and almost carnival pulpit dramaturgy that had disturbed Martin in his formative years as being entirely irrelevant to the contemporary minister's mission of spiritual salvation and social amelioration. The good pastor, Kelsey maintained, is also a good philosopher."⁷ Lewis then continues,

Mike observed the embodiment of Kelsean principles each Tuesday morning when President Mays addressed the student body in chapel. Chapel was compulsory throughout the week, but Dr. Mays endeavored to make Tuesday mornings a special occasion. Some men are special because of what they say, others because of what they do. Dr. Mays was special in both senses. His Bates College Phi Beta Kappa key gleaming from the podium, he had the uncanny ability to interest a restive student body, to invest commonplace observations with an intensity and intimacy of experience that enthralled young men who were, on other mornings, usually sleepy or indifferent. 'There are some faces one notices,' Dr. Mays observes. 'you can tell when a student is interested in what one has to say.' He

⁶Ibid., p. 3.

⁷Ibid., p. 23.

noticed that Martin King, Jr., was interested. Several times, Mike approached Dr. Mays to pursue some point he had raised in his inspirational talks.⁸

Later, it was Dr. Mays who convinced Martin to pursue a career in the ministry. But Martin had also had an early exposure to the kinds of philosophical concepts about which Kelsey had referred while at Morehouse. His exposure to Thoreau's essay, "On Civil Disobedience," had stirred him dramatically in his first classroom encounter. "Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system," he wrote later, "I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times."⁹ He was also introduced at that time to the works of Marx, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel.

Between the influences of Dr. Mays and George Kelsey, then, and his exposure to a philosophical background, Martin's college experiences brought him to a new threshold in his understanding of the cultural and religious experiences that influenced his earlier background. Racial and economic injustices were still the central focus in his passion to comprehend the Negro situation in the South. But for the first time the idea of seeing himself in the role of professional Christian ministry seemed appropriate. Through an intellectual development of philosophy and religion it was possible to integrate dimensions of socio-cultural life with religious experience. Pursuing a seminary education, then, became Martin's next step toward a deeper and more critical view of this interaction. He chose Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. In his biography on King, L. D. Reddick

⁸Ibid.

⁹King, p. 91.

described Crozer as "a liberal and intellectual rather than a denominational institution, in fact, too liberal for some of the Baptists. Historically the fundamentalists brethren had split off from what they felt was the almost Godless modernism that was taught at the seminary."¹⁰

It was at this seminary where Martin began what he called his "serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil."¹¹ One of his Crozer professors, Kenneth Smith, had taken a significant interest in Martin observing his fascination with philosophy and social concerns. Recently Smith, in conjunction with Ira G. Zepp, Jr., has written a book about King, attempting to identify the steps in his intellectual pilgrimage in theology and philosophy as he struggled to grasp a significant Christian approach to the problems of racial and social injustice. Though encompassing the whole scope of King's intellectual development in college through the later years of his ministry, the book by Smith and Zepp has focused primarily on the content of his exposures while at Crozer. These, they submit, are central to his resulting theology and philosophy in ministry and social leadership. Indeed there is some evidence to support this belief, for in one speech King publicly stated,

I gained my major influences from . . . Morehouse and Crozer-- I feel greatly indebted to them. They gave me the basic truths I now believe . . . the world view which . . . I have . . . the idea of oneness of humanity and the dignity and worth of all human personality . . . at Crozer I found the actual living out of Christian beliefs.¹²

¹⁰L. D. Reddick, Crusader Without Violence (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 77.

¹¹King, p. 91.

¹²Kenneth L. Smith, and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), p. 13.

Smith and Zepp have identified Crozer's influence on Martin as being significantly manifested by the teaching of George W. Davis. Of the 110 units need to obtain the B.D. degree at Crozer, Martin took a total of 34 units under Davis, most of which were electives. As professor of theology Davis gave Martin his most important introduction to the approach of evangelical liberalism.

Evangelical liberalism is an area of thought which presupposes a prominent and basic good in human nature. The existence of evil in human nature is recognized, but it is attributed to the result of ignorance and unhappy environmental circumstances. Evangelical liberalism is basically optimistic with the hope that someday, all major social problems will be resolved through the steady work of Christian dedication.¹³

Among the liberal theologians being taught by Davis were those connected with empiricism, personalism, and mysticism. Yet Davis' aim in his teaching was to show that liberals shared common beliefs. In an article he wrote for "Theology Today" in 1948 he identified his approach to liberalism as follows: 1) the existence of a moral order in the universe; 2) the activity of God in history; 3) the value of the personal; 4) the social character of human existence; and, 5) the ethical nature of the Christian faith.¹⁴

The philosophical, historical, and Biblical approach which Davis used to develop these tenets in his teaching was helpful to Martin as he continued his search to find a more concrete and well defined

¹³Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 24.

relationship between the Christian ministry and the social problem of racism and segregation. Later he wrote,

Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I had never found in fundamentalism. I became so enamored of the insights of liberalism that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything it encompassed. I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.¹⁵

Indeed, many of the major themes that had been so pronounced in King's basic message were of the liberal genre. But exposure to liberalism had influenced Martin, as a seminary student, in yet another way. For in his study of the great social philosophers he was introduced to the writing of Walter Rauschenbusch and his Social Gospel Theology. Rauschenbusch, wrote King, "left an indelible imprint upon my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences."¹⁶

Reinforcing much of the reasoning of the evangelical liberal tenets Rauschenbusch had developed a theory of the prophetic model. In this model Rauschenbusch had pointed to an ethical and social basis in Judeo-Christian tradition. Israel's prophets, he explained, had taken bold stands against the existing order in early Hebrew culture. Their preaching often reflected a sense of moral responsibility as they sought to offer constructive guidance to the nation's social order.¹⁷

Jesus also fell within this tradition as his ministry was often

¹⁵Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), p. 165.

¹⁶King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 91.

¹⁷Smith and Zepp, p. 24.

reminiscent of the prophets before him. Christianity, according to Rauschenbusch, is an heir to the Old Testament prophetic model and its emphasis on social and cultural concerns. A Christian approach to culture, then, is marked by the inseparability of elements that are either religious or secular.¹⁸

In order for the contemporary Christian Church to exist in a modern society, therefore, it is important for it to be in a valid and consistent relationship with its heritage. For Rauschenbusch this meant that the Church has a serious responsibility in matters of social concern and that its primary role in society is to be prophetic.¹⁹

Another emphasis in the Social Gospel of Rauschenbusch was the relationship which he said existed between the "Kingdom of God," which is a primary focus in the ministry of Jesus, and the "human community." According to Smith and Zepp, "The one ever present theme in Rauschenbusch's writings is that the Kingdom of God is synonymous with a transformed and regenerated society."²⁰ Rauschenbusch believed that the Kingdom of God could and should be realized on earth in the form of a "true human community."²¹

The theologies of Walter Rauschenbusch and the tenets of evangelical liberalism worked together to strike a loud and responsive chord in King's intellectual quest. Through these theological areas he was able to begin the formation of intellectual tools that would justify his deeper emotional feelings of social responsibility and

¹⁸Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 37, 38.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 40-41.

²¹Ibid., p. 44.

religiosity. It was upon further study of the liberal tenet, the value of the personal, however, where King began to find the most fundamental bases to express his feelings.

He had begun his study of Personalism while still under the guidance of Davis at Crozer. Following his move to graduate school and Boston University, though, he continued his study under the guidance of Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. Though King rarely made direct reference to Personalism throughout his ministry, the themes of Personalism seem to stand out in his message perhaps more than any other. Smith and Zepp have described the Personalistic theology as relating to King's message in four basic categories. The first is the inherent worth of personality; the belief that every individual is created by God and therefore has a unique value deserving of respect from all other individuals. With this premise King asserted a moral obligation to break down any system which did not allow Negro persons to respect themselves or the white persons to respect the Negro for the unique personal value with which they were endowed.²²

Secondly, Personalism affirms the personal God of love and reason. It was important to King and other Black Christians to see God as a conscious personality. In this way human kind relates to God in a personal way. It was for this reason that King took issue with theologians, such as Wieman and Tillich, who felt that a personal God was also a God with limitations.²³

Thirdly, Personalism for King was the existence of a Moral Law

²²Ibid., pp. 104-106.

²³Ibid., pp. 107-110.

in the universe. "The Moral Law," explain Smith and Zepp, "is a manifestation of the ultimate reality. It is not made by human beings; it is discovered by them."²⁴ King's message centered around this idea. It was the rationale by which he led people into protest against laws that had been set up by other people.

Finally, Personalism affirmed the social nature of human existence and community. King's reference to the quote from John Donne that "no man is an island," points out the human need for a social environment in the form of community. The nature of Christian Love in King's view of Personalism could not exist outside of the social realm.²⁵ He relied heavily on this principle as it was important to explain the essential wrong of segregation. A Christian society cannot represent its Christian love when in the process of breaking itself down and cutting itself into smaller groups which were the result of racism and segregation.

For King, the principles of Personalism were in harmony with the broader principles of evangelical liberalism, and the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. His associations with these schools of thought had united in his own thinking so as to equip him with a strong verbal and intellectual grasp of his feelings toward segregation, racism, and the prophetic responsibilities of Christian ministry.

But Martin's search for a ministry that was to unite the ethics and heritage of Christianity with a potent form of social leadership and cultural reform was not yet completed when he had reached this

²⁴Ibid., p. 110.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 113 & 114.

point. There still remained, in him, a need to find a methodology by which the integration could intentionally be applied. In the third year of his schooling at Crozer, he was attracted to the non-violent resistance strategy of Mahatma Gandhi. A lecture given by Mordecai Johnson and a subsequent course he took under Davis in that year immersed him into reading and thoughts about Gandhi and his strategy.²⁶

His earlier interest in Thoreau's "Essay on the Duty of Civil Disobedience," has already been noted. But this encounter with Gandhi stirred him deeply. In Stride Toward Freedom he wrote,

As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform.

Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method of social reform that I had been seeking for so many months.²⁷

The basis of Martin's attraction to Gandhi's strategy of non-violent resistance was developed within four areas. First, he was opposed to passivism in Christianity because it simply resigned itself to oppression in an acquiescent way. This is not Christian, said King, but cowardly and irresponsible. Non-violent resistance, however, stands defiantly and with dignity in the face of oppression.

Second, using violent resistance to oppose oppression is also

²⁶Ibid., p. 47.

²⁷King, Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 96-97.

not Christian. Moreover, it was not a feasible method of social reform to be used by the American Negro. The smaller number of Negroes in America who account for only 10% of the nation's population would certainly be overwhelmed in a violent battle by the nation's majority. Non-violent resistance, on the other hand, does not challenge its opposition in a physically violent way. It is therefore a strategy that is both more sensible in a political way and essentially Christian.²⁸

Thirdly, Martin noticed Gandhi's refusal to separate the religious from the secular. It was reminiscent of Walter Rauschenbusch and his Theology of the Social Gospel.

Finally, there is a deeper level at which Martin was attracted to non-violent resistance. In the movement which Gandhi led, there were two religious assumptions which provided the main motivation through which the movement could proceed. The first was called Satyagraha which is a truth force. When Gandhi believed in himself as an agent of this force, he could effect a change on an immoral situation.²⁹ The second assumption is called Ahimsa, which is the refusal to do harm or to violate the other person's essence. Gandhi perceived that when he followed the method of Ahimsa while trying to bring about the change, he was behaving in such a moral way that the energy of the truth force was spiritually much stronger. Also, the opponent was often thrown off balance by this behavior and tended to give concessions that would not normally have been given.³⁰

²⁸Smith and Zepp, pp. 55, 56.

²⁹Ibid., p. 49.

³⁰Ibid., p. 51.

Martin was impressed by the noble nature of the assumptions and saw that they could also have Christian implications. The "truth force" of Gandhi's Satyagraha struck him as being more like the Christian love force of Agape. Agape, or the spontaneous disinterested love directed toward every person, was the central theme in Martin's approach to non-violent resistance. By thinking of non-violent resistance as a love force, he was able to interpret it as a way of life as well as a strategy for social change. It was essential to Martin's concept of Christian ministry that these ideas also be a way of life. He felt that the essence of the love force was that it avoided an internal violence of the spirit. Thus it was a norm of the Christian life.³¹ The strategy of non-violent resistance was almost like the missing link which he needed before he could actually step into the simultaneous role of ministry and socio-cultural reform. Yet, along with being a strategy, this method became an essential part of his message.

At this point it would appear that Martin Luther King Jr. had attained all the intellectual and practical tools necessary to implement a constructive program of integrating Christian ministry into the field of social and cultural reform that had to do with racism and segregation. An examination of King's intellectual pilgrimage would not be complete, however, without giving recognition to the impressions that the writing and thinking of Reinhold Niebuhr had made on him. Niebuhr, as it turned out, had some of the most profound influence on King by helping him to develop an encompassing but also constructive

³¹Ibid., pp. 62-69.

and critical theology and philosophy. The effects of Martin's exposure to Niebuhr were to bring him into conflict with some of his most solid liberal beliefs. In addition Niebuhr had some critical views with regard to pacifism and non-violent resistance which were to make Martin define his uses of the strategy more carefully.³²

Through the guidance of Kenneth Smith, a professor of Christian Ethics, Martin explored the thinking of Niebuhr in two courses during his senior year at Crozer. "The prophetic and realistic elements in Niebuhr's passionate style and profound thought," wrote King in Stride Toward Freedom, "were appealing to me, and I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote."³³

From Niebuhr, Martin learned to accept the potentiality for evil in human kind as well as good. Niebuhr's focus on the sinful nature of human existence was helpful to Martin as he sought to understand the basis of racism.³⁴ The roots of sin in Niebuhr's analysis is complex and paradoxical. On the one hand persons are free as a result of their capacity for self-transcendence. At the same time, humans are part of nature and are bound by its necessities. Persons therefore are subject to anxiety springing out of their tension between transcendence and necessities.³⁵

Anxiety then, becomes the root which tends to place the self at the center of everything. An egocentric predicament results where

³²King, Stride Toward Freedom, pp. 98-101.

³³Ibid., p. 97. ³⁴Ibid., p. 99. ³⁵Smith and Zepp, p. 76.

the love of self is more important than the love of God. The love of self to the exclusion of other selves follows naturally. This characteristic then, is extended into the social relations of human societies. In a broader and more complex context the basic anxiety begins to surface as persons seek to achieve security by subordinating other selves to the will of the self. Injustice is a consequence of this sinful nature in human kind.³⁶

Carrying the concept further, Niebuhr tried to show how injustice is perpetuated in social structures and institutions. This is the way injustice becomes a permanent factor in human society and why it is so difficult to eradicate. This is the reason it is proper to speak of institutionalized greed, racism, or sexism.³⁷

Niebuhr's influence on King was important also in helping him to clarify his newly discovered interests in Gandhi's strategy of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. It was perhaps Niebuhr more than Gandhi who actually moved Martin in the direction of this strategy. He was profoundly impressed by what Niebuhr had written in 1932 in his book, Moral Man and Immoral Society:

The emancipation of the Negro race in America probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of social and political strategy (i.e., non-violent direct action). It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race. It is equally hopeless to attempt emancipation through violent rebellion. . . .³⁸

Niebuhr's analysis on the relationship between love, power, and justice placed a heavy emphasis on the need for a definite strategy

³⁶Ibid., p. 77.

³⁷Ibid., p. 37.

³⁸Ibid., p. 99.

with which to confront oppression. Those who are in power do not willingly give up the advantages of their authority. It is a moral right of oppressed people to seek a way to challenge oppressors. It is necessary to use coercion.³⁹

Martin was not easily convinced by Niebuhr that a method involving coercion and power was necessary to confront oppression. At first he thought that a method which was Christian with a focus on love to bring about socio-political changes would not be coercive. What he had neglected to see at this point, however, was that love was power, and that non-violent civil disobedience was coercive. Yet in the area of this problem he was helped again by Gandhi who convinced him that, "true pacifism is not non-resistance to evil, but non-violent resistance to evil. Between the two positions there is a world of difference."⁴⁰

It is from this point where Martin Luther King Jr. culminates his thinking. The potentials for the beginnings of a powerful Christian ministry combined in him with a decisive ability to take intentional actions in circumstances that would move toward social and cultural reform. The ideas of the power of Christian love (Agape) together with the use of a strategy that did not offer violence were the keys that he needed to integrate his basically liberal fundamentals of Christian doctrine into a potent force that could be used to break down the evils of racism and segregation. In Stride Toward Freedom

³⁹Ibid., pp. 83-85.

⁴⁰King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 98.

he wrote,

At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love. The non-violent resister would contend that in a struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.⁴¹

In spite of this, however, when Martin had completed his education at Boston University his future was still uncertain. Having finished his course work for the Ph.D. Degree, he was ready to venture out into the pursuit of a career. At that time he was offered two churches in the North East, one in Massachusetts and one in New York. Also, three colleges offered him attractive positions, one as a teacher, one as a dean, and the other in an administrative position. In the midst of all this there was yet another position being offered by the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama.⁴²

The last of these offers was at first the least attractive. Having grown up in the South, Martin and his wife felt that they had been deprived of many advantages as a result of segregation. Finally though, in spite of the disadvantages they decided that their greatest service could be rendered in their native South. "We felt that some of the Negroes who had received a portion of their training in other sections of the country should return to share their broader contacts and educational experiences in its solution."⁴³

Added to this was a more personal basis by which he grounded

⁴¹Ibid., p. 16.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., p. 21.

his decision. Above all else Martin King was devout in his personal relationship with God. He drew much support from prayer and personal meditation, and seeking inspiration from God was important to him before making any decisions of dramatic dimensions. In making a decision such as the one to go to Montgomery he relied on prayerful thought as a guide to his practical reasoning.⁴⁴

This tendency in him to be open to the inspiration of God was perhaps one of his most important attributes in reaching a balance between intellectual knowledge and intuition, between faith and his experiences. In his openness to the directions of the will of God for his life, he had set a flexible posture for himself out of which his ideas and his endeavors could be shaped to fit the needs of the circumstances of his life. As a leader and a minister this characteristic was definitely one that he projected into the church and the movement.

As it turned out, the move to Montgomery was critical in setting the stage for Martin King's early involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. Later he noticed the strange development in which circumstances had brought him and the movement together. He had not come to Montgomery with expectations or a plan to be a central figure in a movement such as this. He wrote:

Although we had come back to the South with the hope of playing a part in the changes we knew were on the horizon, we had no notion yet of how the changes would come about, and no inkling that in little more than a year we would be involved in a movement that was to alter Montgomery forever and to have repercussions throughout the world.⁴⁵

He was not aware that such a movement could develop in

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 17, 18, 21, 59, 63.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 24.

Montgomery. It was a city with a complex racial situation. "At that time," he said, "both Negroes and whites accepted the well established patterns of segregation as a matter of fact. Hardly anyone challenged the system. Montgomery was an easy going town; it could have been described as a peaceful town."⁴⁶

So Martin King's ministry in Montgomery had begun in an unsuspecting and innocent way. In spite of this, by his willingness to be moved by the inspiration of God, his burning beliefs against the moral evils of racism and segregation, and his well thought out strategy against these evils, Martin King was primed to take action with his ministry in the social and cultural arena that supported segregation as a way of life.

In much the same way, Montgomery, Alabama had been primed. Recent years of intimidation by whites over Blacks had been bringing mounting frustrations closer and closer to the surface. Segregation on the city buses was developing as the focal point of these frustrations. The Negro community almost began a bus boycott in 1954 when a young Negro high school girl was taken off a bus and arrested for disregarding the driver who had told her to give up her seat for a white person. At that time, white authorities promised certain apologies for the action but none of these were delivered.⁴⁷

Later then, when the respectable Rosa Parks was arrested in the same way, the community flew into protest. The bus boycott plan was worked out within twelve hours and the movement against segregation

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 41, 42.

in Montgomery had risen to surprising dimensions.

King wrote that Rosa Parks had been ". . . a victim of the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the zeitgeist--the spirit of time."⁴⁸ Three days later King himself was tracked down by the same spirit. He was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and subsequently fell into the role of leader and spokesman for the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

King's ministry at last had reached a pinnacle. He had been thrust fully into the situation of integrating his Christian ministry with a cause of cultural and social concern. In this first of many movements that he was to lead, he had to muddle his way through. His Christian background was sound, his strategy for social change in a Christian way was clear to him, but he knew nothing of the tactical problems that would have to be faced. Solutions to these problems had to be worked out on a day to day basis and sometimes they seemed insurmountable. But through it all, he maintained his practice of drawing on the inspiration of God, and remaining open to God's will for his life.

One situation he described was on the night he was elected president of the new leadership group. In his new position he was to speak before a large number of the protesters. Whenever he spoke or preached he allowed 15 hours for preparation. At this time though, he had only 20 minutes to get ready. Realizing that the hopes and the fate of the boycott could be decisively influenced by his speech, he

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.

was afraid. Realizing also that the people could be moved into either apathy or militant anarchy by the content of his speech he became obsessed with a feeling of inadequacy. At that time he resorted to prayer. Then he prepared his outline emphasizing the need to confront the oppressor directly, but in Christian love. After preaching to the throng he realized that his message was received and was a success. "I came to see for the first time what the older preachers meant when they said, 'Open your mouth and God will speak for you.' While I would not let this experience tempt me to overlook the need for continued preparation, it would always remind me that God can transform man's weakness into his glorious opportunity."⁴⁹

A pattern was set in Martin Luther King as he met this first large scale confrontation. He would rely on his knowledge and his determination to right the wrongs of social evil, but he would always be open to the spirit of God, as it moved through him in time and history. His ideas, though always retaining their foundational form, were subject to change and growth. The experience in Montgomery was a birth for King, and the twelve years of his ministry that followed were characterized by a message and ministry that evolved to be more encompassing all the time.

In June, 1963, King's "I Have A Dream" speech caught the nation's attention. By then, not only the Montgomery battle had been won, but several other confrontations, including Birmingham. His message was beginning to take on even newer dimensions. He spoke of

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 63.

equality for all Americans and he projected an idea that had been just below the surface of his message since the beginning; that freedom from racial prejudice was liberating for white Americans as well as for Negroes. If we are truly to confront the racism of white people with love, he maintained, we must also realize how they have been degraded and how their personhood has suffered by maintaining a system of segregation.⁵⁰

Then in August of that same year he preached the "I Have A Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. The occasion was the Civil Rights March on Washington with over 100,000 white and black people participating. By this time the dream had matured and it had become an integrated philosophy of democracy and the kingdom of God. He told the crowd that despite the bitter temporary setbacks, he held fast to his dream, a profoundly American dream, of a nation radically changed. One day, he hoped, the nation would really practice its creed that, "all men are created equal;" that the children of blacks and whites would one day live in brotherhood. He hoped his four little children would not be judged by their color, but by their character.⁵¹

Going on he said: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."⁵² Shifting from this Biblical imagery back into the

⁵⁰Lewis, pp. 210-12.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 228.

⁵²Ibid.

rhetoric of American democracy he continued: "This will be the day when all God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, 'My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, Let freedom ring.'"⁵³

Closing his speech then, Martin brought together his Christian dream for America:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'⁵⁴

At last, King had drawn the two together. From the most far reaching areas of society and religion he called forth the American dream of democracy, and the Christian vision of God's Kingdom in the same light.

⁵³Ibid., p. 229.

⁵⁴Ibid.

Chapter 3

THE 'BELOVED COMMUNITY':
AN INTEGRATING MODEL FOR CHURCH MISSION

Heretofore we have been interested in the thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. as developed within two areas. At first we discussed the importance he placed upon the church's Mission and the basic responsibilities he saw as being assigned to the church as a result of that Mission. Second, we turned to the unique character of King's ministry in an effort to understand the integration he achieved through a mutual response to cultural and religious influences. It would be incomplete, however, to develop a picture of King's thinking by using these two areas without presenting a third area that had gained a culminating kind of prominence for King.

We are now in the position to examine this area, referred to by King as the "Beloved Community." For our purposes in this project it will be viewed for its importance in two ways: first as it integrates the basic themes in King's thinking about church Mission and his approach to ministry; second as a profound and far reaching concept that has dimensions of possible application by the church in America in its continuing effort to be in Christian Mission as it is faced with the increasingly complex demands of a contemporary society of the 1970s.

It has been said that "the vision of the 'Beloved Community' was the organizing principle of all King's thought and activities."¹

¹Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), p. 117.

Indeed it is apparent from his activities, and the things he wrote and spoke about that he was fundamentally preoccupied with the actualization of an inclusive human community.² As early as the Montgomery bus boycott he had made reference to this theme. The purpose of the boycott, he wrote, is to seek "reconciliation; the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the 'Beloved Community.'"³ Later in 1957 he related further to the concept in an SCLC Newsletter describing the purpose of the organization. It is "to foster and create the 'Beloved Community' in America. . . ," he affirmed. "SCLC works for integration. Our ultimate goal is genuine inter-group and inter-personal living integration."⁴

As related the "Beloved Community" to King was much more than a simple idea. It was, as he perceived it, a quality of interrelatedness; personal and social relationships created out of love. Human interdependence, he reasoned, is a fundamental fact of life. It is inconceivable for any person or group of persons to live fully as a community at the expense of other persons. In The Trumpet of Conscience, he explains:

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.⁵

For this reason justice is a central issue in the "Beloved

²Ibid., p. 119.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 120.

⁵Martin Luther King, Jr., The Trumpet of Conscience (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 69.

Community." Wherever injustice is present the dynamics of a totally realized community are cut back and the lives of all people are affected.⁶ Racial segregation, for King, stood out as the most blatantly recognizable injustice in America. He saw the American Negro as the embodiment of an impoverished people. It was the most obvious symbol in his perception of the absence of an holistic American community.⁷

In response to the severity of the situation he envisioned integration as a step toward "holy community." Distinguishing from a simple form of desegregation he described his vision of integration as a positive kind of acceptance of Negroes by the majority culture as welcomed participants "into the total range of human activities."⁸

To say by this that King thought the "Beloved Community" is something that could be realized within his own life time or within the prospective future would be to limit the concept greatly. The demands of the idea are so far reaching that each victory over injustice leads to a further understanding and perception of other injustices that are even more subtle and deeply embedded.⁹

King himself had experienced a revelation of this sort in his own life time. He began from an understanding that racial segregation in the South, by itself, was the most central injustice in America. From this he moved finally to the position that whenever oppression of

⁶Smith and Zepp, p. 122.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 120.

⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), p. 78.

an impoverished group exists, whether they are poor people in America or enemies in Vietnam, it was damaging to the development of a holistic human community created out of love.¹⁰ With the realization of these broad dimensions, he cautioned often against over optimism.

At the same time he encouraged a sense of hopefulness. Though the task to which he referred was grandiose, he believed that any achievement toward a loving community in society, no matter how small, was a step closer to the "Beloved Community." He had spoken about the people working together in the Civil Rights Movement as a microcosm of that community. Within that structure there had actually been a breaking down of barriers between race and class.¹¹ He sought to emphasize these ways in which the "Beloved Community" had been realized pointing out that, even in isolated forms, "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you."¹²

Moreover his faith in God and the power of Christian love led him to be hopeful. Believing that God works in and through history, he accorded God the ability to conquer the evils of history. Justice is a slow process to come about, he proclaimed, but it is constant as it unfolds within God's creation. As persons seek to attain freedom, he believed, God is an everloving companion. Like a Father He works through history for the salvation of His children.¹³ There is purpose,

¹⁰David L. Lewis, King: A Critical Biography (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), pp. 204-305.

¹¹Smith and Zepp, pp. 121-22.

¹²King, Strength to Love, p. 78.

¹³Ibid., p. 128.

then, in the struggle for justice. "As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil," he wrote, "the God of the universe struggles with us."¹⁴

At the same time there are certain moral laws that God has placed within the structure of the universe. The forces of evil may be able to defy the truths of these laws for a time, but only temporarily. Justice is inevitable, therefore, not only through the efforts of human beings but through the accompanying unfolding of God's constant love and power as His will becomes enacted within the world.¹⁵ As the inevitable process of justice comes to pass the vision of a community created out of love is closer at hand.

When viewed through his concept of the "Beloved Community" the themes in King's approach to the church's Mission and his ministry of integrated cultural and religious influences come together significantly and gain their most important perspectives in his thinking.

The first area developed in the chapter on Mission points to the church as an instrument which encourages a sense of dignity, self-esteem, and self worth within individuals. This is essential to the enabling process of bringing persons into a Christian relationship with God. Concern for the individual's spiritual, psychological, and physical well being is an important part of the "Beloved Community." This concern begins with King's understanding of integration where he emphasized the personal as well as social needs. A segregated society, he thought, was dehumanizing to both the oppressed and the oppressor.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 128, 129.

Whites who were responsible for the suppression of Blacks were actually as much in need of being freed from their hatred and the lines of social separatism they had drawn in their lives, as were Negroes in need of being freed from the oppressive limitations being placed on them because of white racism. In both groups' situations a type of dehumanizing barrier exists preventing the persons within the groups from fully realizing God's redeeming closeness and love in their lives. It is therefore a condition of the "Beloved Community" to equalize the opportunities for both groups so persons together can share in the "inalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and share the hope of salvation in a fulfilling and personal relationship with God.

Similarly, in King's development of the intellectual tools with which to combine the influences of culture and religion, he turned to the thinking of liberalism and the theology of personalism. God is met by individuals, in this perspective, through their personal lives and the identity of their social environment. As a creation in the "image of God," persons are able to align themselves with God in a parent-child relationship. From this identity it is natural to understand oneself as having a kind of inherent worth and it is also natural to understand others as being a reflection of the "image of God." There is then, a kind of divinity endowed in persons; an inherent respectability divided equally among all persons.

For an individual to be in a personal relationship with God two things are necessary. First the individual needs to be aware of his or her inherent dignity as a pre-condition to an identity with the "image

of God." Second, the individual needs to be aware of the same dignity inherent in all persons. In this realization God is met on the social strata. The "Beloved Community" recognizes that the conditions for individuals to attain spiritual, psychological, and physical self-actualization are tied up in the social necessity for individuals to be treated and respected as interrelated equals regardless of race or class in society.

The importance of the second area in the chapter on Mission follows naturally. As the equality of all persons is recognized out of the common trait of having been created in the "image of God," the church's next responsibility is to be a social environment involving an atmosphere of "brotherhood and sisterhood" through worship and fellowship wherein all Christians are bound together in the love of God through Christ. The concept of the "Beloved Community," however, carries the same responsibility even further. It asserts to the world that all human beings, because of their common worth under the parenthood of God, should be interrelated as brothers and sisters. King has explained that it is a call for world-wide fellowship that lifts the sense of neighborliness beyond tribe, race, class, and nation. It is a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love "as the supreme unifying principle of life."¹⁶

To understand more of what King meant by this "unconditional love," it will be helpful to refer to the concept of "Agape love" that

¹⁶Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 190.

was discussed briefly in the section on Gandhi in Chapter II. Agape has been defined by King as an overflowing love that is understanding, creative, and redemptive. It expresses goodwill toward all persons without seeking anything in return. " . . . it is the love of God operating in the human heart."¹⁷ He distinguished this type of love from that of liking other persons or finding particular enjoyment in the company of those persons. He couldn't like anyone who had bombed his house, he wrote, or exploited him with injustices. But it is possible to love those persons in a disinterested and unconditional way. The way of Agape.¹⁸

This kind of love is a community creating force. The inherent unselfishness characterized by this love leads to cooperation instead of competition and conflict. The force Agape love will strive in originating and perpetuating the elements of community.¹⁹

Love is the key that unlocks the door to ultimate reality [he wrote]. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John: 'Let us love one another; for love is of God: and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.'²⁰

The vision of a love so transcending as to form the basis for national and global community is an important part, then, of the "Beloved Community." But the church's role at this point must now be

¹⁷King, Trumpet of Conscience, p. 73.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 73-74.

¹⁹Smith and Zepp, p. 131.

²⁰King, Where Do We Go from Here, pp. 190-91.

underscored. It is an aspect of its Mission to be the social environment with an atmosphere of "brotherhood and sisterhood" created out of the love of God through Christ as shared by Christians in worship and fellowship. By its very nature it is a potential small scale model of this aspect of the "Beloved Community." Serving in an exemplary way the church is called to demonstrate to the nation and the world a love that is powerful enough to create community beyond barriers brought on by differences in tribe, race, class, or nation.

In order to realize the power of Agape love in a community creating dynamics, however, the issues of justice and freedom must be taken into account. For this reason we will turn now to the third area in the chapter on Mission in which the church is a community which strides toward freedom. In that overview we described freedom as being often equated with justice and equality in King's thinking. Furthermore we pointed to the two dimensions of freedom: the freedom of the individual and the freedom of persons within society. Both of these dimensions, we stated, are relevant in the church's stride toward freedom. In Chapter 2, freedom was discussed primarily as it had become an obsession and an inspiration to stir the young Negro, Martin King, to search for a religious answer to a cultural injustice.

In the concept of the "Beloved Community" freedom has a central role. Black Americans are in need of freedom from the oppression of racism and segregation. White Americans are in need of freedom of malformation resulting from racial hatred. Poverty stricken and deprived persons of all races are in need of freedom resulting from economic injustice and exploitation. He wrote:

Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World--Asia, Africa, and Latin America--will no longer be the victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy, and disease.²¹

As it has already been pointed out, for King, freedom was a future oriented goal. The concept of the "Beloved Community" is a future event. It is a vision about a time conceived of by King when all people in the nation and the world would be able to live together in social harmony reflecting equality at all levels and a greater depth of personal individual fulfillment. The target date for this future event is most distinctly "future." It cannot be pinned down to the year 2000, 2100, or 2200. It is a vague and hopeful conceptualization rather than a specific and designated plan.

There are two reasons for an openendedness of this sort in King's vision. The first is a result of his exposure to Reinhold Niebuhr. As explained in Chapter 2, Niebuhr had a tempering effect on the liberal optimism of the young Martin King. By pointing to the existence of evil as a part of the nature and character of human kind, Niebuhr had helped King to see the enormous complexities involved in the process of bringing about justice.

The second reason for an openendedness is related to King's belief that in order for the "Beloved Community" to come about, an interaction must take place between the will of God and the activity of

²¹Smith and Zepp, pp. 122-23.

human kind. The "Beloved Community" cannot be a human initiated event, nor can it be brought about solely through the efforts of human kind. Rather, it is an event to be initiated through the will and the love of God as these become actualized in the efforts of human kind.

As has already been mentioned in Chapter 2, King had come to terms with nature of this interaction in his own life. He understood the Civil Rights Movement as the "zeitgeist" or "the spirit of the time," catching up with the Negroes of the South. God, he believed, works in history. He considered himself to be a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny as he was tracked down by the "zeitgeist" to be a leader of that movement. At the same time he had relied heavily on his personal meditative relationship with God as a source of inspiration and direction for the activities he undertook as leader of that movement.²²

Focusing on the future brings out the importance of God's role in the vision of the "Beloved Community." But as we have also asserted the role played by persons, and specifically by the church in Mission, is an event of the present. King had demonstrated the importance this has in the church's stride toward freedom as he emphasized the prophetic tradition. In Chapter 2 we discussed the influence Walter Rauschenbusch had on King in helping him realize the validity of the prophetic tradition.

Then we pointed to non-violent direct action as the strategy used by King as it amplified even further the church's stride toward

²²Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 59.

freedom in a prophetic tradition. To explain how this strategy became incorporated in his ministry, the influence of Mahatma Gandhi on King was discussed.

In King's thinking, both the prophetic tradition and the strategy of non-violent direct action are meant to achieve the "Beloved Community." Incorporated within the nature of these approaches is a way of life that is moral and practical. It was inconceivable, King thought, to achieve moral ends without moral means. It is most important to use a strategy that is consistent with the goals that are being sought. Non-violent direct action is such a strategy. It is consistent in its approach and in the life-style it causes the user to live by, with ultimate goals of the "Beloved Community."²³

I'm just not going to kill anybody, whether it's in Vietnam or here. I'm not going to burn down any building. If non-violent protest fails this summer, I will continue to preach it and teach it, and we at Southern Christian Leadership Conference will still do this. I plan to stand by non-violence because I have found it to be a philosophy of life that regulates not only my dealings in the struggle for racial justice but also my dealings with people, with my own self. I will still be faithful to non-violence.²⁴

Those who participate totally in a strategy and life-style of non-violent direct action are bringing the events of the present into a meeting with the future. They represent a small scale form of a realized "Beloved Community."

This leads to the fourth area that was discussed in the chapter on Mission; that the concerns of the secular life are brought together with the faith and the vision of the religious experience in

²³Smith and Zepp, p. 133.

²⁴Ibid., p. 138.

Christianity. The church community that takes the calling of the prophetic responsibility seriously and responds with direct action is in the process of interrelating Christian faith and vision with the values and goals that characterize society. As we pointed out, the United States in particular is primed for an association between religious vision and secular hopes. With statements such as "liberty and justice for all," and the right of all to pursue happiness, democracy is founded upon truths that are basic in the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God.

In Chapter 2 we were again interested in this relationship as we sought to understand how King had integrated the cultural and religious influences in his ministry. As a youth, we noted, he had been driven by a type of burning obsession to overcome racism and segregation. As a minister's son it is not too ironic that he had finally become interested in the applications of Christianity to confront the social disease. It was not until he had actually begun his ministry in Montgomery, however, before he realized the important relationship between the hopes of an American democracy and the vision of the "kingdom of God."

The overlap between religion and culture is probably the most important part of the process in moving toward the "Beloved Community." It is inconceivable for the vision of Christianity to be realized in history unless it comes to terms with the real social and political problems that exist in the world. It is unfortunate that simple "Christian brotherhood" is not enough to bring about the changes necessary to realize God's Kingdom. But the religion must be able to speak the

languages of the world in order to bring about changes in the world. "To be in the world and not of it" is the goal of a Christian Mission in any nation of the world at any time in history. In the same way, democracy, without Christian vision is an empty hope. It is a pile of words thrust upon an imperialistic empire designed to give guidance to a nation struggling for an independence through revolution. The ideas, by themselves, are simplistic, suggesting a rather quaint and uncomplicated kind of utopia where everyone gets along nicely simply by respecting the individualism and freedom of everyone else. But the realities of evil within a system of freedom are prevalent. The dreams fall short of an utopia. They lack the historical vision and integrating love born out of a harmony with the God of the universe. These dreams, by themselves, are not capable of moving into a dynamic freedom of the future.

And so it is that the search for the "Beloved Community" calls both for secular dreams and non-secular vision. For only by the two combined is there a holistic approach to the ultimate goals of freedom, justice, and equality in the future.

This brings us to the place where we are ready to examine the second question of this chapter; viewing the importance of the "Beloved Community" as a profound and far reaching concept that has dimensions of possible applications by the church in America in its continuing effort to be in Christian Mission as it faces the increasingly complex demands of the 1970s. Let us first consider a few of the variables that now confront the church in America.

To begin with, the contemporary American church is faced with

the challenge of being in Mission to a technological society. King's awareness of the enormity in this challenge was acute. In his lecture given at the Nobel Peace Prize he described the dramatic dimensions of scientific and technological advancements:

Modern Man has brought this whole world to an awe-inspiring threshold of the future. He has reached new and astonishing peaks of scientific success. He has produced machines that think and instruments that peer into the unfathomable ranges of interstellar space. He has built gigantic bridges to span the seas and gargantuan buildings to kiss the skies. His airplanes and spaceships have dwarfed distance, placed time in chains and carved highways through the stratosphere. This is a dazzling picture of man's scientific and technological progress.²⁵

Yet as he goes on to explain, this advancement has served to amplify a focus on the immorality and injustice of inequality. "There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially the poorer we have become morally and spiritually."²⁶

In Strength to Love he wrote an essay directed to America under the assumed identity of the Apostle Paul. "News has come to me regarding the fascinating and astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm," he writes. "All that is marvelous." Then he adds:

But America It appears to me that your moral progress lags behind your scientific progress, your mentality outdistances your morality, and your civilization outshines your culture. . . . Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood. So America, the atom bomb you have to fear today is not merely that deadly weapon which can be dropped on the heads

²⁵Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Nobel Lecture" (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 2.

²⁶Ibid.

of millions of people, but that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts of men, capable of exploding in the most staggering hate and devastating selfishness.²⁷

King's focus was on the unique situation developing in the world. Inadvertantly the advances of science and technology set the stage for global and national confrontation. Where the evils of racial segregation, poverty, and war had always been an accepted part of living, modern science brought them into view with a zoom lens effect. Human kind is faced now with a phenomenon of seeing itself in a mirror. It can either ignore the image that stares back and thereby destroy all sense of self respect and order, or it can face these evils and try to overcome them. Thus the church finds itself living in an age and a society moving speedily in the ways of scientific advancement and becoming less sure of itself in its identity.

Another way in which the contemporary American church is being challenged in its Mission relates to the drive for liberation by racially oppressed people. Like a fever spreading throughout the world, wrote King, the freedom movement has caught on. In his Nobel speech he said:

The great masses of people are determined to end the exploitation of their races and land. They are awake and moving toward their goal like a tidal wave. You can hear them rumbling in every village, street, on the docks, in the houses, among the students in the churches and at political meetings. Historic movement was for several centuries that of the nations and societies of western Europe out into the rest of the world in "conquest" of various sorts. That period, the era of Colonialism, is at an end. East is meeting West. The earth is being re-distributed. Yes, we are "shifting our basic outlooks."²⁸

²⁷King, Strength to Love, pp. 156-57.

²⁸King, "The Nobel Lecture," pp. 4-5.

As the freedom movement reaches its peak, the conscience of the church in Mission must be aroused. It cannot overlook any longer the need for equality among all racial groups.

A third area of concern to reach the American church is that of poverty. On this subject King pointed the finger of responsibility toward the United States, the richest and most productive country in the history of the world, with one-fifth of its population poverty bound. The particular tragedy with poverty today is that the resources and technology are available to overcome it. Yet, instead of using science to eliminate poverty, the evidences of affluence and wealth are flaunted in front of the poverty stricken people. Portraying this awesome contrast, in his Nobel speech, King said:

Glistening towers of glass and steel, easily seen from their slum dwellings, spring up almost overnight. Jetlines speed over their ghettos at six hundred miles an hour; satellites streak through outer space and reveal details of the moon.²⁹

In recent years Americans were shocked to discover that hunger and starvation had become a world-wide problem. While the problem was not as severe when King was alive, he was, nevertheless, aware of its existence.

He spoke on the subject calling on the rich nations to use their vast resources "to develop the underdeveloped and school the unschooled and feed the unfed." The wealthy nations of the world, he continued, must see it "as a moral obligation to provide capital and technical assistance to the underdeveloped areas." "If they would

²⁹Ibid., p. 12.

allocate just two percent of their gross national product annually for a period of twenty years . . . mankind would go a long way toward conquering the ancient enemy poverty."³⁰

The church of America, therefore, finds itself being challenged from two fronts. On the one hand it exists within one of the wealthiest countries in a poverty stricken and hungry world. But at the same time it finds the element of poverty right at its own doorstep.

A fourth way in which the American church is being challenged has to do with war. The problem of war, King pointed out, is pressing in as a danger for total global destruction. Yet, the strongest nations are devoting more and more of their energy and genius to step up their military strength. Wisdom born of experience tells that war is obsolete. In his Nobel speech he said:

If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war--God forbid!--will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to ultimate death.³¹

As we have shown, the challenges being laid before the contemporary American church in Mission are of overwhelming dimensions. Between the problems of rapid scientific advancements and sagging morality, racial injustice, poverty and war, the church has been confronted by an awesome responsibility.

³⁰King, Where Do We Go from Here, p. 178.

³¹King, "The Nobel Lecture," p. 16.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that the trends in American Christianity show the church backing away from the confrontation of serious problems that are social and cultural in nature. Following a path that has become increasingly divided in two directions, the American church of the 70s has been one to underestimate the immensity of serious problems facing the nation and the world in this age.

The first of the two directions that the church has taken to avoid the challenges is the evangelical and charismatic direction. Since 1970, these groups have been growing rapidly. As Christians they are largely a sincere group of people, exhibiting deep personal devotion through a biblicist theology that often finds its expression in the intensity of emotion.

The second group, on the other hand, has been known for their emphasis on social outreach. As Christians, they too, are a sincere group of people. They center more around a liturgical form of worship and find meaning more from an intellectual based theology with less emphasis on inspirational and Biblical input.

To one degree or another, the churches within both of these groups have undertaken the tasks of Christian Mission. But in the cases of both groups a serious gap exists between the Missional challenges being placed on contemporary American Christianity by the nation and the world, and the Missional responses of churches in the groups.

There are many possible reasons for the existence of this gap. The first has to do with a feeling of helplessness and impotency in recent years. The beginnings for these feelings probably came about as the result of political and social conflict during the 1960s. Many

Americans were awakened during that period to a multitude of socio-cultural and political problems in the nation and the world. The response of these persons in the 70s, therefore, has been to take the stance that there are too many problems that are too big to be solved. Church members, representing a cross section of these persons, have taken a similar stance.

The second reason for the existence of a gap is the inability of the average American Christian to identify with these problems. Since most Americans are middle class, most Christians are also middle class. The problems to which we have referred in this overview touch middle class Americans only indirectly. It is difficult for the average Christian in America to fully understand the dimensions of the socio-cultural and political problems which challenge the church in Mission today.

The problems to which we have alluded, however, are very real and dangerously important. Imminently, they will grow to crisis proportions at which time they will begin to affect all human lives, regardless of class. As we pointed out earlier, ". . . all life is interrelated. We are all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality."³²

For this reason, facing the gap which exists between the Missional challenges being placed on contemporary American Christianity

³²King, The Trumpet of Conscience, p. 69.

by the nation and the world, and the Missional responses of the churches, cannot be passed off; but it must be treated with the utmost urgency.

It is at this point where we will propose the vision of the "Beloved Community" as a concept to be applied in the Missional approach of the contemporary American church. For the first part, the "Beloved Community" concept responds to the claim that we are helpless against the major socio-cultural and political problems with its emphasis upon the future. Reminding us that God acts in history, it encourages us to believe in God's redeeming love and to maintain hope for justice and freedom in the future.

At the same time, it urges us to join our forces with God's redeeming love, and take action in the present, thus showing our faith in God's future. The action that we take should be consistent with the ultimate goals that we are trying to achieve, so whatever we do it should be done out of an unconditional and accepting love.

For the second part, the "Beloved Community" concept responds to the claim that we are unable to adequately identify with socio-cultural problems by reminding us that as human beings we are created in the "image of God." As such we all find a commonality and an equality in the parenthood of God which ties us with one another, regardless of race, sex, tribe, class, or nation in a universal "brotherhood and sisterhood." We have a world wide fellowship together in which we share God's love and redemption as he continues to be at work in history.

In closing, let us put it this way, in King's words from his

Nobel speech:

We have inherited a big house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together--black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslems and Hindus, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn somehow in the one big world, to live with each other.

This means that more and more our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. We must somehow give an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies.³³

³³Ibid., p. 19.

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